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ABSTRACT

This booklet is intended to provide parents with some critical information to help monitor and control their child's behavior on the Internet. Highlights include: the need for ground rules; how to gain knowledge about the Internet; what the Internet is; the World Wide Web; Internet Relay Chat (IRC); Usenet groups and e-mail; some red flags; monitoring your child's usage; and software products that can help to monitor and control children's access to the Internet. (MES)

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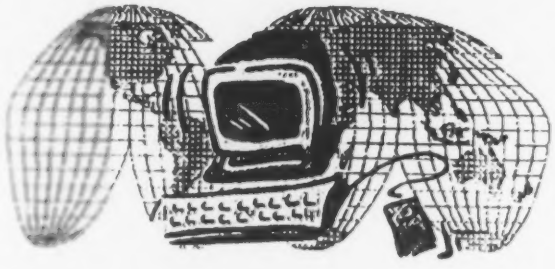
Keeping Your Child Safe



on the Information SuperHighway

A Parent's Guide

Nevada High Technology Crime Task Force
Office of the Attorney General

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Introduction

The Internet is truly an amazing recreational and educational resource for your child. A wealth of information and entertainment from around the globe is available in your home -- just a mouse click away. A child's experience on the Information SuperHighway can expand awareness of other cultures, improve grades at school by accessing enormous amounts of information, and provide hours of safe entertainment.

Parents need to be aware that, for all a child derives from surfing the Internet, there are some dark and dangerous off-ramps on the SuperHighway. Criminals of all types - pedophiles, scam-artists, hate-mongers, racists, and the mentally ill can lurk in the cul de sacs of the Internet. While these criminals are few, they can pose a substantial threat to your child. The risks are threefold:

1) Exposure to material inappropriate for children.
2) Exploitation by sexual predators.
3) Frauds perpetrated on the innocent.

This booklet is intended to provide parents with some critical information to help monitor and control their child's behavior on the Internet. Parents want to ensure that the Internet experience represents a productive employment of their child's time. You, as a busy parent, may not have the computer proficiency that your child possesses. This brochure attempts to explain, in a non-technical manner, some of the ins and outs of the Internet and suggests some simple steps you can take to better protect your child.

The Need for Ground Rules

Even if you can't tell the difference between a computer and a microwave oven, you should establish family ground-rules for accessing the Internet. Your technical capabilities and lack of time may limit your involvement but you *can* shape web surfing into a family activity. Here is a common sense approach to family Internet use:

- Tell your child that you control his or her access to the Internet and that he or she is expected to stay within your guidelines.
- Locate the computer in a central, communal area of the house. Put it in the family room or den -- not in a child's bedroom.

- Establish specific times when access to the Internet is permitted and keep to that schedule.
- If your child uses a computer at school, call and see if his or her school has adopted an "acceptable use policy" for the Internet. Ask for a copy of this "AUP" and use it to establish your own guidelines at home.
- Limit the length of access time. This will encourage your child to go directly to the information required, rather than wander aimlessly around the Internet.
- Explain to your children that many sites on the Internet are not appropriate for children and they are expected to stay away from them.
- Encourage communication between you and your children. Ask about their Internet experiences and what they have learned.

Gain knowledge about the Internet. The easiest way to do this is to have your child show you how to log on and move around. This makes the Internet a shared family experience and allows you to assess your child's capabilities. The more technically astute the child, the greater the risks.

How to Gain Knowledge

Pick up a book on the Internet or attend a class. There are many non-technical books available that will show you the ropes. The best way to learn is just to log on and start surfing. The Internet is so easy to navigate that anyone can do it.

What is the Internet?

The Internet is essentially hundreds of thousands of computer systems from around the world linked together. The individual, company, or agency that owns it controls each of these systems. There is no single authority which controls these computers (also called "sites" or "nodes"), and the number of sites in the network is constantly changing and growing. It is this lack of authority that makes the Internet so compelling — each site owner can post the information that he or she wishes. But, this unchecked freedom does have a downside, as we shall see.

Your home computer is not one of the "sites" on the Internet. You must contract with an "Internet Service Provider", (or "ISP"), to gain access to the net. The ISP is your gateway to the vast numbers of computer systems on the net.

There are several methods of communicating on the Internet:

The World Wide Web
International Relay Chat
Usenet
Email
FTP and Telnet.

This booklet discusses the first four — by far the most used. Your child is unlikely to be using FTP and Telnet, but if so, the principles discussed apply just the same.

The World Wide Web

The WWW is the most popular method of Internet communication. These are the colorful and entertaining "websites" you can access to gain information. Many of these sites are commercial in nature — they exist to sell goods and services. Transactions are typically carried out by credit card. This is a billion dollar a year industry which is growing rapidly. The Internet can be an efficient shopping venue — if you keep the following in mind:

- Deal only with sites you know to be reputable, such as established companies with which you would be comfortable doing business outside the Internet.
- Find out the vendor's warranty and return policy before you buy.
- Some goods are more suitable for electronic trade than others. Books and electronic equipment are easily and accurately described on Web pages — clothing and art may or may not be as depicted.
- The old adage "If it sounds too good to be true it probably is" applies to the Internet, as well.

There are many websites on the Internet that display and sell pornographic pictures. Some of these sites take active measures to assure that pornographic images are not available to children, but many do not. Typically they publish lurid or obscene materials on their opening "page" to entice customers. The screening mechanism for determining whether or not the site visitor is an adult is the assumption that if a credit card is available, then the visitor must be at least 21. Many children are clever enough to circumvent the screening methods employed. Here's what you can do:

- Make it clear to your child you are aware that there is pornographic material on the net, and that looking at such material on the net is forbidden.
- Explain that if the URL (Uniform Resource Locator — the site's address) has adult language in it, the site is not to be visited.
- If the child has access to a credit card, instruct the child never to give it out over the Internet.
- Instruct your child to talk to you if he or she ever finds anything on the Internet that makes them feel uncomfortable.
- Maintain a continuing dialogue with your child. This does not mean constantly peering over his or her shoulder, but take some time to find out what Internet services your child uses and why.
- Consider restricting your youngster's searches to known worthwhile sites. The American Library Association has evaluated 700 sites as great for kids. Their URL is: http://www.ala.org/parentspage/greatsites/.
- Make sure that Internet guidebooks ("Yellow Pages") which your child owns do not include adult listings.

If you make web surfing a shared family experience, you should have few problems in this area.

International Relay Chat

IRC or simply "Chat" is essentially a text based CB radio on the Internet. Two or more people get together, electronically, on a server and write messages to each other. Chats usually are conducted in a "themed" room. Thus, individuals with a mutual interest can communicate. Some of these chat rooms have sexually explicit themes.

This is a very problematic area for children. Everyone who signs in to a chat room does so under a nickname — thereby remaining anonymous. Your child may believe she is chatting with a sixteen-year-old cheerleader from San Diego, who in reality is a 48-year-old pedophile from Sacramento. Recent news has shown how dangerous this can be — particularly when the pedophile lures the child into a face-to-face meeting. Ground rules:

- Tell your child never to give out his or her full name. Don't allow use of the profile feature in the chat software.
- Instruct your child to never reveal any personal information — school, address, phone number, personal

family situation, etc.

- Try to find moderated chats with appropriate themes. The larger ISPs, (America On-line, for example), have moderated chats.
- Tell your child to leave a chat room if obscenities are exchanged.
- Instruct your child to notify you immediately if someone asks to meet them in person or send photographs.
- Tell your child never to send or receive a file in a chat room without your permission.
- Discuss the chat with your child.
- Spend 5 or 10 minutes reading the messages appearing in a chat room in which your child has shown interest.

Consider restricting your children from chat rooms altogether. This has a great deal of merit. Since there is no way of confirming the identity of the persons in the chat room, or the truth of the conversation, many parents feel that chat rooms are not only a safety risk, but a waste of time.

Usenet Groups and Email

Usenet groups are essentially bulletin boards where individuals post messages and files. This can be very beneficial for your child if he or she has a special interest, hobby or avocation.

Unfortunately, some of these "Newsgroups" have a sexual theme — members exchanging pornography. Others serve as a forum for racists and hate-mongers. The names of these groups generally have an "alt." (for alternative) prefix in their title. As a parent you may want to be sure that your child enlists in groups that share your values. Fortunately, this is easy to do:

- Find out what newsgroup your child wants to join and why. Restrict your child to that group.
- If you have problems, consider signing up with an ISP that restricts adult newsgroups.
- Again, maintain a dialogue with your child.

Some newsgroups are engaged in the "pirating" of software. Pirating is the illegal copying of commercial software. These newsgroups typically have the name "warez" in their title. Some people today erroneously believe that copying software that they do not pay for is not really theft. It is theft and you may get caught. The reason software is so expensive is that the software companies must pass the cost of the lost revenues on to those who do pay. Steps you can take:

- Restrict your child from "warez" groups.
- Explain to your child that pirating is theft, and won't be tolerated.
- If you have "borrowed" software from a friend, remember what kind of example you are setting.

Email is an area with which you should have few problems — since it is maintained on the ISP server and is accessible to you. As a practical matter, tell your child not to give out the Email account address to anyone without your permission, and never to reveal any passwords.

Some Red Flags

Here are a few pointers on what to look for if the Internet is becoming a problem:

- Secretive behavior on the computer. Making the parent feel unwelcome at an on-line session.
- Unexplained loss of capacity on the computer's hard-drive. (It may be crowded with pornographic image files, which are typically very large).
- A sudden new friend you don't know.
- Excessive time on the Internet.
- Hidden floppy or Zip disks which may be used for storage of inappropriate or illegal files.

Monitoring Your Child's Usage

It is worthwhile to occasionally check your child's computer system. Use the file manager of your operating system to examine the hard drive for offensive files. These graphic files usually have a .GIF, .TIF or .JPG file extension. These files can be hidden so make sure that your file manager is set to show hidden files. The nature of the file can be disguised by changing its name. Look for software programs (files with an .EXE file extension) that you do not own. Review your browser's history list. Make sporadic checks of your child's floppy disks. Be

aware that a savvy child can defeat any of these monitoring activities. For a pamphlet describing, in more detail, methods for monitoring the use of your computer, contact Charlie Stokes at the Attorney General's Office at 775-684-1129.

Software Products that Help You Protect

There are a number of inexpensive computer software products that can help you monitor and control your younger children's access to the Internet. "CyberPatrol", "SurfWatch", "CyberSitter" and "NetNanny" are a few of the better known brands. Consult with your ISP or computer dealer for more information. You should also have a good virus protection software package. A virus is a software program, hidden in files on the Internet, designed to corrupt files on your computer system. Since your child will likely be downloading files from the Internet, you might pick up a virus which can damage your computer system .

Conclusion

The Internet is a wonderful tool, which, when used correctly, can greatly enhance the educational opportunities for your child. We hope the information we have provided you will help ensure that your family enjoys safe and fun cruising on the Information SuperHighway.

If you are interested is assisting the Nevada High Technology Crime Task Force, a group of representatives from law enforcement and the business community working together to fight high tech crime, contact the Attorney General's Office (Anne Cathcart at 684-1115, or Kevin Higgins at 688-1818). Your suggestions, comments and ideas are welcome.

Oct. 1999